

Things we see: Portuguese anthropology on material culture

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A FEW DAYS AGO, ON A CONVERSATION WITH A YOUNG STUDENT who wanted to do research on Portuguese cinema and popular culture objects, João Leal was explaining to her that to question ourselves about what is put on display is as important as to search for what is concealed. In Portugal, thinking about the path taken by material culture studies over the last three decades should precisely call upon the formulation of such a double interrogation.

When Ana Paula Zacarias and I took off to Trás-os-Montes in 1982 – both of us prepared for the “fieldwork” with all the excitement and ignorance of our twenties –, I kept deep in my mind some of those marvellous drawings of objects from the Portuguese rural world executed by Fernando Galhano for the research work carried out by Jorge Dias, Ernesto Veiga de Oliveira and Benjamim Pereira at the Centro de Estudos de Etnologia (Ethnology Studies Centre) and the Museu Nacional de Etnologia (National Museum of Ethnology). Up until then, Portuguese anthropology – both in its Estado Novo ethnographic version¹ and through the works led by Jorge Dias, who had tried to draw a more articulated dialogue with foreign scientific literature (Leal 2000, 2006) – had awarded a particular significance to material culture and, by consequence, our academic training had provided us with an appetite we

1 The Portuguese World Exhibition, which took place in 1940, was the most representative moment of the way Estado Novo’s ethnography used the objects from folk culture to think about the nation as a whole.

were obviously ready to naturalise, so that once in the field we were keen to look out immediately for the objects.

However, just like some film directors – and the images collected in the 1960s and 1970s by António Campos, António Reis and Margarida Cordeiro were also in our minds – we almost failed to see some of the objects that were sprawled all over the houses and fields we were visiting in Trás-os-Montes. We insisted in looking out for traditional storage benches, baskets, spindles, looms and embroideries, while we were blind to all the fridges, cookers, mixers and TV sets surrounding us. For us, the first generation of anthropologists trained in democratic Portugal, the notion of ethnography as a matter of urgency by the beginning of 1980s was still opposed to any wish to build up a new perspective upon a country that was then going through a rapid process of social change.

It was in that same decade that those objects, until then somehow concealed, have started to be taken into account and questioned by Portuguese anthropologists. While the rural world was going through a depopulation process leading to empty villages in the winter that would then be crowded with emigrants in the summer, the cities were growing disorderly and a new middle class was taking shape. The “emigrants’ houses” were perhaps the first objects representing this new social and cultural framework, as they became unavoidably visible on the Portuguese rural landscape. Involved in a controversy that was starting to draw among architects and urban planners, those houses have compelled anthropologists to confront the changes resulting from those migration processes which happened precisely in their main ethnographic field.² They were big and ostentatious enough to be seen by everyone and, therefore, they began to be scrutinised from a point of view that had more to do with territorial landscaping than with social relations, lifestyles and symbolic values attached to them. That emergent perspective, which included already a lot of the questions we currently identify as being “issues of material culture”, has then started to be built up by anthropologists and sociologists. Presented as hybrid objects resulting from processes of spatial, social and cultural mobility of their owners, the “emigrants’ houses” compelled anthropology to review the way it had perceived, up until then, the relationships between house, family, society and culture. The new layouts for domestic spaces, as well as the practices and representations associated with them, were then thought as being the outcome of people, objects and ideas on the move – a situation that has implied, right from the start, an analytical linkage between, on the one hand, Portuguese society and culture, and, on the other, the societies and cultures

2 The build-up of such a new outlook also took place in films, with works such as *L'Horloge du Village*, by Philippe Costantini (1989), and, later on, *Regresso à Terra*, by Catarina Alves Costa (1994).

of the host countries (Leite 1989; Leite and Villanova 1990; Rocha-Trindade 1989; Silvano 1988, 1990, 1993, 2002; Villanova, Leite and Raposo 1995).

Still in the 1980s, the signs of a new phenomenon have started to emerge which came to congregate, up until now, a rather significant part of Portuguese studies on material culture: that phenomenon was “popular culture”, which, within the framework of a progressive globalization, has gone through several processes of emblemization and objectification (not just in the sense of transforming culture into an object, but also of turning it into a consumption product, and therefore into a commodity). On a first stage, the emblemization of a few (material and immaterial) elements from the rural cultures came up strongly attached to a more general phenomenon involving the social and cultural transformations brought about by emigration itself. When returning home for their summer holidays, emigrants have invested a significant amount of their capital on the revivification of ancient traditions from their birthplaces, on an active process of objectification regarding their idea of “*terra natal*”, or hometown (Leal 1999, 2010; Silvano 2006). On that complex reshaping work of their rural cultures, they were then joined by national migrants and tourists coming mainly from the new Portuguese urban middle classes. At the same time, the old rural houses (both manorial and popular) were renovated to host new temporary inhabitants, and the arts and crafts, the gastronomy and the ritual and festive life were transformed in order to integrate new cultural and mercantile dynamics (Raposo 2009). As in other countries, the build-up of heritage dynamics had reached the rural world and local institutions had also emerged to assume an active role in those processes of cultural objectification and commodification.

Faced with this new reality, anthropologists got involved with it, by trying both to produce an analytical understanding and assuming an active role in its production (mainly through the museological treatment of those objects, but also, however exceptionally, by intervening in the control mechanisms associated with the production of traditional objects for the market). It might be at this point that we can actually find a line of continuity between the material culture studies from the 1960s and 1970s, and the contemporary ones. Benjamim Pereira, the youngest member of the research group involved in the creation of the National Museum of Ethnology, was a focal character on the tracing of such continuity. Surrounded by anthropologists from the new generations, he helped us to understand the social life of objects which had made that shift from the traditional rural country to this reinvented countryside.

As for the museological events, it will be useful to take into account three exhibitions that, right from the beginning of the 1990s, marked the path we are trying to trace of the way Portuguese anthropology has been seeing objects over the last 30 years. They all took place in Lisbon and Oporto – having been,

for that reason, aimed at the cultural consumption of urban elites, including the (then young) anthropologists who would later assume an active role within the process I have just mentioned. Two of them – “Fado, Vozes e Sombras” (*Fado*, Voices and Shadows, see Brito 1994) and “O Voo do Arado” (The Plow’s Flight, see Brito 1996) – were hosted at the National Museum of Ethnology, under the supervision of Joaquim Pais de Brito, and, on a certain level, they have corresponded to the closure of a cycle and the opening of a new one. Produced as an initiative for Lisbon as the European Capital of Culture, the exhibition on *fado* worked on the more international element of the country’s immaterial heritage. It built on an icon of the urban popular culture to provide a dynamic perspective sustained by the interaction between past and present, which had repercussions over the way the new generations have started to perceive material culture ever since. On the other hand, “O Voo do Arado” has sealed a long cycle of collecting and mapping objects from the traditional rural world. Also in 1994, another exhibition was presented in Oporto, curated by J.A. Fernandes Dias (responsible for the research work, conceptualization and guide), Eglantina Monteiro, Paulo Providência and Ângelo de Sousa, called “Memória da Amazônia: Etnicidade e Territorialidade” (Memory of Amazonia: Ethnicity and Territoriality, see Dias 1994). It displayed both objects collected in the 18th century by Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira, and contemporary objects produced, under the supervision of FUNAI – Fundação Nacional do Índio (National Foundation of the Indian, Brazil), to be commercialised in the international ethnic market. Based upon a critical stand about the traditional ways of thinking and displaying indigenous objects, the exhibition materialized museological and conceptual approaches which were then innovative in Portugal. The objects were part of an exhibition discourse which drew on the notions of territory and ethnicity to think the relationship of almost five centuries between the Amazon peoples and the outside. For the curators, it was more important to perceive the instability of those objects’ course than to inscribe them into stable social and cultural settings.

Over the following years, the museological treatment, since then with a spatial approach that was also regional and local, was kept as a privileged place to think and do ethnographic work on material culture from rural origins. The texts and films produced for the exhibition “Rituais de Inverno com Máscaras” (Winter Rituals with Masks), which took place in Museu do Abade de Baçal, in Bragança (see Pereira 2006), are an example of that, as well as some of the texts produced following the creation of the museum which accommodates objects from Aldeia da Luz, a village formerly laying on the fields that have been submerged by the waters from the Alqueva dam (Saraiva 2005). The attention given to the social and cultural micro contexts where those objects at the museum have come from, as well as the transformations in terms of usage and meaning those objects have gone through over their lifetime, revealed

conceptual concerns which are coherent with a new theoretical framework, quite different from the one which has conducted the research work over the 1960s and 1970s (more focused on the technical and formal regular features of objects inscribed on a historical *longue durée*).

This heritage dynamics has also been extended towards other geographies, which have included fishing communities and traditional industrial zones. Even here, there have been ethnographic researches on material culture – in this case more concerned with matters of knowledge and technologies –, both for museological purposes (the Museu do Trabalho Michel Giacometti, in Setúbal, might be the best known case), and for pure research goals (Durão 2003; Marques 1999, 2000; Nunes 2008; Sarmiento 2008).

The social construction of the heritage dynamics also brought with it mechanisms of formal regulation associated with the idea of “authenticity”. Some objects have got a foot into the market with an added symbolic value (acquiring through that an extra monetary value), depending on a certification process which regulates the techniques and knowledge applied on their production. Anthropology has not interfered often in these processes – its critical posture can easily keep that from happening –, but in the specific case of “*lenços de namorados*” (lovers’ handkerchiefs), one of the most successful objects in the market of ethnic items with an added heritage value, this process of regulation/certification took place alongside with an anthropological research work which has critically deconstructed the impoverishing representation that such “spontaneous” process of objectification had already produced (Durand 2008). Thereby, the anthropological tools ended up turning even more complex the representations which have been produced of that object, opening up new possibilities for its production.

The endless amount of objects that have entered Portugal over the last 30 years – all those trivial and prevailing things that fill up the houses of a country which has finally reached the age of mass-consumption, despite its specific economic constraints – is absent from this account. Following the objects brought in by emigrants returning from Europe and America and by former settlers returning from Africa, Portugal, which under the dictatorship had remained closed to the outside world, was progressively opening itself up to the global markets. In the 1980s, the first big shopping malls made their appearance, followed since then by other shopping centres (with international brands for middle and lower incomers), “Chinese bazaars”, the IKEA and, finally, the flagship shops of luxury goods. The fact that Prada has opened in Lisbon a shop in the Summer of 2010, precisely when the international institutions are wondering about the Portuguese economic stability, is actually part of a new reality: Lisbon, the capital of one of the poorest countries in the European Union, is now becoming a shopping centre for the economic elites of its former colonies.

All those objects brought in from abroad have lived over the years inside Portuguese homes, without having been of any particular interest to anthropologists. They were in fact sporadically mentioned, mainly when approaching such subjects as the rural world transformations resulting from new mobility processes (as it was the case with the “emigrants’ houses”), but they were never the defining object of an autonomous work, either for ethnographic description or analytical interpretation purposes. The path taken by material culture studies over the last decades (Turgeon 2007), intended to integrate mass-consumption objects in the fieldwork, only recently has been incorporated by Portuguese anthropology. The issues mentioned above, related with the objectification processes of popular culture, have obviously forced an approach to the consumption issue, although the more common objects which since then have been made available in a mass-market scale remained less studied. In order to do it, Portuguese anthropology has needed, on the one hand, to consolidate the studies in urban contexts – the ethnographic approaches to the working classes (Cordeiro 1997; Menezes 2004; Seixas 2008), middle classes (Seixas 2008) and financial elites (Lima 2002) – and, on the other hand, to incorporate a theoretical field that was going through a deep renovation process (Duarte 2002, 2010; Rosales 2002, 2005, 2009a). This way, research has started to be conceptually anchored and affiliated to the thought of authors as Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Arjun Appadurai and Daniel Miller. Carried out in the metropolitan areas of greater Lisbon and Oporto, and focusing itself on the urban middle classes, the anthropology of consumption goods has given particular relevance to the domestic context, taken here as the place where the objects initiate, as a result of appropriation mechanisms, their second lives. Having started by studying the domestic objects within the context of Portuguese migration routes, Marta Rosales (in press) then went on exploring issues regarding the relationship between objects and Portuguese emigration in a Canadian context, and also, with Filomena Silvano, in a Brazilian context. Alice Duarte (2003, 2009) started her studies observing the “go shopping” practices in a shopping centre in greater Oporto, and then followed from there the objects path into family homes and sociability networks. Assunção Gato (2009), relating the domestic consumption issues with the urban space consumption, studied the lifestyles of families who inhabit a space that has gone through a process of urban regeneration after the World Exposition took place in Lisbon in 1998.

While its consumption patterns were getting closer to the ones from other countries within the European Union, Portugal was coming to terms with the fact that it was now also a country of net immigration, mainly for people from its former colonies. Often made invisible in their first years in the country, recently these immigrants have made their appearance in the public arena as the conveyers and producers of new cultural models, assuming, thus, the

role of agents on the shaping of a new multiculturalism. This reality, which was punctuated by several features reflected in the media and on the political arena, has a quite obvious material and expressive translation, having now been studied by anthropology both from the point of view of its cultural production and its public consumption (Cidra 2002, 2008; Fradique 2003). In this research environment, the mass-produced objects have acquired new meanings when associated with processes of identity construction, and now are also related, within the mechanisms of ethnic identities building, with those coming from the same countries of origin as the immigrants (Rosales 2009b). Part of the objects that anthropologists can now find in Lisbon result from the existence of networks with rather diverse historical, social and cultural origins, linking Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Brazil and Portugal, as well as the countries which have attracted all these countries' diasporas.

The publishing of papers by Portuguese and Brazilian anthropologists in this dossier dedicated to consumption might come to generate a productive collaboration between researchers from both countries, which for over five centuries have seen arriving from the other side of the Atlantic strange objects that, in turn, have taken the routes of the diasporas mentioned above, from luxurious and whimsical items as the indigenous leaders' feathers and the carriages of the Portuguese royalty, to common and irreplaceable goods as the *havaianas*.

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